

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-07 H-03 INR-10 L-03

NSAE-00 NSC-07 PA-04 RSC-01 PRS-01 SPC-03 SS-20

USIA-15 EB-11 CAB-09 COME-00 DOTE-00 FAA-00 TRSE-00

OMB-01 DRC-01 /122 W

----- 041779

R 211750Z MAR 74

FM AMEMBASSY LONDON

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 8919

INFO AMEMBASSY BONN

AMEMBASSY PARIS

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E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: ETRN, SENV, UK, FR

SUBJECT: CONCORDE FUTURE REMAINS IN DOUBT

REF: LONDON 3484

1. GREAT UNCERTAINTY CONTINUES TO SURROUND FUTURE OF CONCORDE PROJECT. IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING REPORT TO PARLIAMENT AS TO DISMAL ECONOMIC PROSPECTS FOR CONCORDE (REFTEL), SECRETARY OF STATE FOR INDUSTRY, WEDGEWOOD BENN WENT TO BRISTOL AREA WHERE AN ESTIMATED 9,000 WORKERS ARE EMPLOYED ON CONCORDE PROJECT. THERE, WITHIN A PERIOD OF 24 HOURS, HE HELD SOME 12 MEETINGS WITH TRADE UNIONS AND CIVIC GROUPS AS WELL AS WITH OFFICIALS FROM BRITISH AIRCRAFT CORPORATION AND ROLLS-ROYCE, THE AIRCRAFT'S PRINCIPAL BRITISH MANUFACTURERS. BENN CLIMAXED BRISTOL TOUR WITH AN ADDRESS TO A MASS MEETING ATTENDED, ACCORDING TO THE PRESS, BY AN ESTIMATED 11,000 WORKERS FROM BAC AND ROLLS-ROYCE. THROUGHOUT HIS BRISTOL VISIT, BENN VERY CLEARLY LEFT IMPRESSION THAT LABOR GOVERNMENT HAS NOT YET TAKEN A POSITION FOR FORTHCOMING

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TALKS WITH FRENCH ON CONCORDE AND CONTINUED BRITISH

FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR PROJECT STILL POSSIBLE.

2. EVEN ALLOWING FOR THE FACT THAT BENN'S CONSTITUENCY IS BRISTOL SOUTH-EAST WHICH INCLUDES A LARGE NUMBER OF VOTERS DIRECTLY EMPLOYED ON CONCORDE, HIS PERFORMANCE DURING BRISTOL TOUR WAS IN SOME RESPECTS SURPRISING CONSIDERING THAT HIS REPORT TO PARLIAMENT ON MARCH 18 HAD VIRTUALLY DESTROYED THE COMMERCIAL CASE FOR CONTINUING WITH CONCORDE PROGRAM. BENN'S BASIC MESSAGE, IN ESSENCE, WAS THAT CONCORDE IS FINE AIRCRAFT AND EVEN THOUGH THERE MAY NOT BE A COMMERCIAL CASE FOR CONTINUING PROJECT, THERE MAY BE SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL/ MILITARY ARGUMENTS WHICH, IF PROPERLY ORCHESTRATED AND BROUGHT TO BEAR, MIGHT BE SUFFICIENTLY COMPELLING TO PERSUADE GOVERNMENT TO SUSTAIN AIRCRAFT PROGRAM DESPITE FINANCIAL LOSSES INVOLVED.

3. ALTHOUGH A GREAT MANY NATURALLY BELIEVE THAT BENN'S BRISTOL PERFORMANCE WAS DESIGNED MERELY TO TRY TO AVOID BEING LABELLED, AT LEAST AMONG HIS CONSTITUENTS, AS MAN WHO KILLED BRITISH PARTICIPATION IN CONCORDE PROGRAM, KEN BINNING, DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF CONCORDE PROGRAM, DEPARTMENT OF INDUSTRY, ASSURES US THAT LABOR GOVERNMENT HAS NOT REPEAT NOT REACHED ANY DECISION RE CONCORDE AND THAT BENN SINCERELY BELIEVES MESSAGE HE DELIVERED IN BRISTOL AREA. AS RESULT OF BENN VISIT, UNIONS AND CIVIC GROUPS IN AREA ARE GEARING UP CAMPAIGN TO TRY TO GAIN SUPPORT FOR CONTINUATION OF CONCORDE. BINNING IS CAUTIOUS AS TO CAMPAIGN'S CHANCES FOR SUCCESS.

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: AGREEMENTS, SST, NEGOTIATIONS, CONCORDE PROJECT, GOVERNMENT EXPENDITURES, COST ESTIMATES, PUBLIC ATTITUDES
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 21 MAR 1974
Decaption Date: 01 JAN 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: morefirh
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1974LONDON03601
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: N/A
Errors: N/A
Film Number: D740060-0854
From: LONDON
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1974/newtext/t19740326/aaaaayhz.tel
Line Count: 93
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Office: ACTION EUR
Original Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 2
Previous Channel Indicators:
Previous Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: LONDON 3484
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: morefirh
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 24 APR 2002
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <24 APR 2002 by ifshinsr>; APPROVED <03 JUL 2002 by morefirh>
Review Markings:

Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
30 JUN 2005

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: CONCORDE FUTURE REMAINS IN DOUBT
TAGS: ETRN, SENV, UK, FR, (BENN, ANTHONY WEDGEWOOD)
To: STATE
Type: TE
Markings: Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 30 JUN 2005